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Solving the School-Transportation Challenge: What Cities can do to Help
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Introduction

What is the nexus between transportation and schooling? That is, how does the accessibility of public transportation influence student attendance and student learning? How can cities make a difference? Most Americans think of school transportation in terms of the yellow school bus, but for many students across the country, the picture is more complex.

Research Record

Early research on transportation and schooling came in the era of desegregation. Some urbanites may still remember that busing formed a cornerstone of many districts' school integration policies. Most studies on the short-term effects of busing found that it did not have a significant impact on student achievement, and that any effects on long-term status attainment were modest.[1] Since *Milliken II* (1973) in which the Supreme Court turned away from large-scale involvement in district policies, and its simultaneous turn away from forced integration,[2] the decline in district busing policies has also resulted in a decline of their study and any serious academic consideration of the role of transportation in student achievement and outcomes. Recent literature has focused on "active transportation," or getting children to walk to school. But this is only an option for students who attend schools in their neighborhoods, and where those neighborhoods are safe.

A New Landscape

School-choice policies have taken the place of desegregation policies as the driver for a renewed interest in transportation and schooling. "School choice" refers to a wide variety of programs that offer students and families an alternative to district schools that have been assigned on the basis of residence. School-choice options can include open enrollment, where students can attend public schools outside the district in which they live; within-district choice such as charter and magnet schools (and sometimes traditional district schools); and vouchers or tax credits, which allow funding to follow eligible students to private schools. Local education agencies handle transportation concerns for choice programs in a variety of ways, often as the result of how state statutes are written. For example, in New Jersey, all public school students who live outside a walk-radius from their

[1] Wells, A. S. & Crain, R. L. 1994. "Perpetuation Theory and the Long Term Effects of School Desegregation." *Review of Educational Research* 64:531 55.

[2] Armor, D. J. 1995. *Forced Justice: School Desegregation and the Law*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Chapter 1, "Desegregation Policy and the Law," Pages 17-58.)

school are entitled to transportation, and whenever a school district is required to provide transportation to students attending regular public school programs, students attending nonpublic schools who meet those distance requirements may also be entitled to transportation services.[3]

This is also the case in New York City, where the Office of Pupil Transportation provides either busing or public transit cards to all students, regardless of the type of school they attend. Texas, in contrast, provides transportation for students attending magnet or Career and Technical Education (CTE) schools, but not to students attending charter or private schools.[4] Ultimately, each school district sets its own policies on transportation. This leaves a lot of room for variation in the quality and quantity of transportation provided by mid-sized urban districts.

The increasing presence of non-neighborhood schooling, for all of its merits, has unwittingly contributed to a separate and unequal system of school transportation. Students from affluent families who own cars can get to school with relative speed and ease, while low-income students may have to resort to underdeveloped public transit systems that can lead to commute times of more than an hour in each direction.

The research community has not caught up to this new reality; no meaningful studies of the effect of transportation upon children's academic outcomes exist. We can, however, hypothesize that complicated, costly, and time-consuming school commutes are likely correlated with negative student outcomes including truancy and higher dropout rates, lower participation in extracurricular activities, a tendency to opt out of high-performing, selective schools that are further from home, and lower achievement overall. Because of these theoretical effects and their long-term concerns for society, it is crucial that school districts and city leaders investigate the transportation challenges their students face and develop comprehensive plans to ensure that every child has a safe, affordable, and efficient way to get to school on time.

A brief survey of the current landscape yields examples of cities with acute and persistent challenges as well as examples of cities that are beginning to chart a new course.

Oakland: A City with Distinctive Challenges

Oakland is struggling to get students to school. The Oakland Unified School District does not provide any student transportation except as mandated for Special Education students.[5] Students in Oakland, together with adult allies at a number of advocacy organizations, have been pushing since 2001 for free school transit as part of the "Free Transportation to get our Education" campaign.[6] Meanwhile, they must pay for public transportation to and from school. Fares for school-aged youth are $1.05 each way, or $20 for a monthly pass - an upfront cost that many low-income families cannot

[3] State of New Jersey Department of Education, School Finance, "Frequently Asked Questions," <http://www.nj.gov/education/genfo/faq/faq_transportation.shtml> accessed 15 March, 2017.
[4] Texas Education Agency, School Transportation Funding, "Background Information on Transportation Funding," <http://tea.texas.gov/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=25769819133&libID=25769819242> accessed March 15, 2017.
[5] Oakland Unified School District, Transportation: <http://www.ousd.org/Page/15151> accessed 11 March 2017
[6] Iny, J. & Hussain, L. 2006. "Free Transportation to Get our Education." Race, Poverty, & the Environment, 12 (1), pp. 56-58.

afford.[7] In a 2005 survey, sixty-one percent of youth reported sometimes using lunch money to pay for the bus to school.[8] Like many diverse districts, Oakland's schools are varied in quality, and many parents opt into choice programs outside of their neighborhoods. The cost and time constraints associated with transportation to and from school make it difficult for low-income families to choose the school that would work best for their children. Oakland is therefore an example of how modest transit options can reduce equity and, one surmises, lead to a widening achievement gap.

The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), meanwhile, has its own challenges. As Oakland, SFUSD does not provide school bus service for students. Two-thirds of public-transit riders are people of color, and low-income riders disproportionately use the bus system rather than BART or Caltrain – regional rail networks that serve predominantly well-off communities. The rail services receive disproportionately high state subsidies and public transit funding, leaving the bus system underfunded even while it used by the neediest citizens.[9] After years of campaigns and lawsuits, in 2012 the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) launched the Free Muni Program for low- and moderate-income San Francisco youth, since SFUSD also does not provide school bus service. San Francisco youth with a family income at or below the Bay Area Median Income level ($107,700 for a family of four) can fill out a simple form in paper or online and provide proof of age to receive free transportation on Muni (San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency) routes while using their enrolled pass. They will continue to be enrolled until their 19th birthday, with no additional requirement on the part of the family or child.[10]

Charlotte-Mecklenburg: Separate Systems, Uneven Results

In Charlotte, North Carolina, the district has taken an integrative approach to transportation for its district-wide magnet schools. The district offers dozens of magnet programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels focused on themes that range from the International Baccalaureate to creative arts to language immersion. The city is divided into three transportation zones, and families have transportation priority for magnet schools within their zone.[11] The district provides traditional busing for students attending their home school or any magnet within their zone, and in addition many magnet programs offer a "shuttle" service for students who are in a choice program outside their zone. Shuttles retrieve students from a designated drop-off point at an area school in their neighborhood.[12] This helps make magnet-school busing more efficient by reducing the number of bus stops, and it also reduces the burden on parents by allowing them to drop off students at a

[7] AC Transit. "Fares and Passes." <http://www.actransit.org/rider-info/fares-tickets-passes/> accessed 11 March, 2017.
[8] Iny, J. & Hussain, L. 2006. "Free Transportation to Get our Education." Race, Poverty, & the Environment, 12 (1), pp. 56-58.
[9] Mayer, G. & Marcantonio, R. 2010. "Bay Area Transit – Separate and Unequal." Race, Poverty & the Environment, 17 (1), pp. 30-33.
[10] San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency. "Free Muni for Youth Program." <https://www.sfmta.com/getting-around/transit/fares-passes/free-muni-youth> accessed March 23, 2017.
[11] Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Choice, "Schools," <http://cmschoice.org/your-choices/schools/> accessed March 15, 2017.
[12] Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, "Magnet Transportation information," <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/transportation/magnetinfo/Pages/default.aspx> accessed March 15, 2017

supervised shuttle stop near home. As a result, magnet schools are accessible to all students, and families within the district have access to a broad range of school options.

However, district magnet schools are only one element of school choice in North Carolina, which also has a large number of public charters and an Opportunity Scholarship voucher program, which offers public subsidies for low-income and disabled students to switch from public to private schools. There are 16 charter schools in Mecklenburg County. Charter schools in North Carolina are authorized by the state and receive per-pupil funding from the state and partially from the district. Each charter school is individually responsible for creating a transportation plan, but is only required to ensure that transportation is not a barrier for students who live nearby.[13] As a result, many schools of choice in Charlotte do not provide transportation, which creates a separate system of accessibility for students between district magnet schools and state-authorized charters. Charter and traditional public schools receive the same amount of transportation funding, but the way statutes are written gives a lot of flexibility in how charters use the funds, while district schools must use these allotted funds for transportation only.[14] While the district has been working hard to expand access to transportation for its own schools and students, the individualized approach to charter transportation services results in widely disparate transportation policies.

Denver: A Fresh Look at Transportation

Key city and district constituents in Denver have partnered to help students get to school. Denver's school-choice policies are extensive, with upwards of 80% of families opting to choose their child's school. Like many districts, Denver Public Schools (DPS) guarantees free busing only to students attending their neighborhood school who live outside a one- to three-and-a-half-mile walk-radius. Busing is also provided for some district-wide choice programs on a case-by-case basis.[15] Fewer than 40,000 DPS students are eligible for transportation, out of about 92,000 total students enrolled. However, the district also works to make sure that every school has a travel plan through a partnership program called Commute DPS.

Commute DPS is a collaboration between the City of Denver, Denver Public Health, and Denver Safe Routes to School Coalition.[16] The program provides support to school leaders to establish pickup/drop-off traffic patterns and safety protocols, and it works with parents to coordinate commuting groups. Commuting groups may include remote drop-off points at which parents leave their children with a supervised group who will walk, bike, or take public transportation to school

[13] North Carolina State Board of Education, Office of Charter Schools, "Transportation FAQ for Board Members," <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/charterschools/information/topics?role=board&&topic=Transportation> accessed March 15, 2017.

[14] Dawkins-Law, S. & Verdin, A. 2013. "Public charter schools with transportation: Increasing learning opportunities for all students." *Financial and business services internship program*, Project 7.4.

[15] Denver Public Schools. "Transportation information." <http://transportation.dpsk12.org/information-for-families-and-students/> accessed 9 March, 2017.

[16] Denver Public Schools. "CommuteDPS." <http://transportation.dpsk12.org/schools_departments/commutedps/> accessed 9 March, 2017.

together.[17] In partnership with the Denver Regional Council of Governments, Commute DPS offers a free website to help parents "schoolpool," or coordinate shared community transportation. Finally, thanks to community pressure and the mayor's office, high-school students have access to discounted public transit, which facilitates student use of local public resources to ease the provision of school-specific bus routes for children in choice programs.

Denver is considered a model for other mid-sized cities. Denver's approach to transportation and schooling is part of a city-wide effort to coordinate between the mayor's office, the school district, and the transportation authority and to create buy-in among parents and schools. Community advocacy groups, local family foundations, and the DPS Community Planning and Advisory Committee have also played an important role, pushing for increased funding and supporting a bond and mill levy that would add $400,000 to the DPS transportation budget. As a result, Denver has been able to leverage a variety of local resources to make reliable transportation a reality in a high-choice city.

The Policy Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities

Building a successful transportation network to support students and schools requires a community-level collaboration that may include regional and state-level actors such as regional transit authorities, school boards, and community foundations, as well as support from city and state legislators. A first step is to bring local public transit authorities and school leaders together to provide free- or reduced-cost passes for public transportation. Doing so will also cause city leaders to evaluate the robustness of the public transportation system itself; even free transportation will not mediate the difficulties associated with an under-resourced bus or rail system that serves a small number of neighborhoods. In Baltimore, for example, under-developed rail systems and notoriously inconsistent bus service mean that a student trying to get from a neighborhood in West Baltimore to a selective high school across town could expect to have a commute of 30-60 minutes and to change busses at least once.[18] The same commute would take only 15 minutes by car. It is important that cities invest in an efficient and high-quality transportation system, that serves all residential areas and with routes that make sense to commuter patterns in the region.

Additionally, while public transit systems can play a major role in getting middle- and high-school students to and from school, they are less helpful for families with elementary-school children. Parents are understandably unwilling to let young children travel alone, and parent work schedules can render even free public transportation to and from school difficult. Districts can play a role by encouraging parent and school collaboration in developing community transport plans, and providing resources and support for local initiatives.

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[17] Denver Public Schools. "Student Commuting Groups." <http://transportation.dpsk12.org/schools_departments/commutedps/student-commuting-groups/> accessed 9 March, 2017.

[18] Stein, M. L, Grigg, J., Cronister, C., Chavis, C., & Connolly, F. (2017). Getting to High School in Baltimore: Student Commuting and Public Transportation. Baltimore Education Research Consortium. < http://baltimore-berc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/GettingtoHighSchoolinBaltimoreJanuary2017.pdf> accessed 31 March, 2017.

Technology and improved data systems can be vital in addressing all of the above challenges. Cities could develop rideshare platforms that use websites or apps to support carpools and allow parents to find other families with whom they can share transportation costs and responsibilities. Cities could also use data to solve traffic flow problems. For instance, careful analysis of ridership and traffic hubs can enable districts and public transit systems to build efficient, empirically based bus routes for students and the public. Or cities can forecast the school-transportation needs of the future by using census and school-enrollment data. They can thus ensure that they have infrastructure and resources in the right places to support students both in the present and also as they grow and move to new schools. If city agencies are able to work together and share information, data analysis can have a cross-sector impact on the economy and the local services that communities need to thrive – beginning with its youngest members.